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ABSTRACT

This report describes and compares different methods used to calculate and report dropout rates; discusses advantages and disadvantages of each method; explains what is known about dropout students; and outlines actions states are taking to reduce dropout rates. Data are presented on whether dropout rates are lower now than in the 1980s in Southern Regional Education Board states and on dropout rates by state: percentage of ninth graders who do not graduate within 5 years; percentage of 9th-12th graders who leave school without a diploma each year; percentage of 9th graders not enrolled in 12th grade 4 years later; percentage of teens who are not high school graduates and not enrolled in school; and percentage of young adults who complete high school. The paper also examines who drops out in terms of race/ethnicity and gender and why and state actions to reduce further dropout rates. These practices include: establishing comprehensive plans, holding schools accountable for dropout rates, providing assistance to local schools and districts, establishing policies encouraging school attendance and completion, and establishing dropout recovery programs. The final section discusses strategies that work (e.g., identify students at risk early and provide interventions, prepare students for school transitions, and involve parents). (SM)

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SREB

Reducing Dropout Rates

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EDUCATIONAL BENCHMARKS 2000 SERIES

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Goals for Education: Challenge 2000

BY THE YEAR 2000—

All children will be ready for first grade.

Student achievement for elementary and secondary students will be at national levels or higher.

The school dropout rate will be reduced by one-half.

90 percent of adults will have a high school diploma or its equivalent.

Four of every five students entering college will be ready to begin college-level work.

Significant gains will be achieved in the mathematics, sciences and communications competencies of vocational education students.

The percentage of adults who have attended college or earned two-year, four-year and graduate degrees will be at the national averages or higher.

The quality and effectiveness of all colleges and universities will be regularly assessed, with particular emphasis on the performance of undergraduate students.

All institutions that prepare teachers will have effective teacher-education programs that place primary emphasis on the knowledge and performance of graduates.

All states and localities will have schools with improved performance and productivity demonstrated by results.

Salaries for teachers and faculty will be competitive in the marketplace, will reach important benchmarks and will be linked to performance measures and standards.

States will maintain or increase the proportion of state tax dollars for schools and colleges while emphasizing funding aimed at raising quality and productivity.

The SREB Commission for Educational Quality, 1988

DROPOUT RATE

BY THE YEAR 2000—

The school dropout rate will be reduced by one-half.

SREB Goals for Education, 1988

Dropout rates in most SREB states are lower now than in the mid-1980s and are dramatically lower than in the mid-1970s. The SREB region has led the nation in reducing the dropout rate over the last two decades.

By the mid-1990s, the percentage of 16- through 24-year-olds without high school diplomas and not enrolled in school had been reduced by one-third — from 19 percent in 1975 to 13 percent in 1995. But progress has stalled since 1995; the rate remains at about 13 percent.

Most SREB states now have comprehensive plans for reducing dropout rates. These plans include:

- systems to collect and report dropout data for different groups of students;
- programs to identify and help students who are most likely to drop out of school;
- policies to reduce excessive absenteeism; and
- special assistance for particular groups of students, such as teen parents, children of migrant workers, and children whose native language is not English.

Compared with a decade ago, we know more about who drops out of school and why. We know that low expectations and academic and career-preparation programs that are not challenging will not keep students in school. We know that students who have fallen behind in reading, mathematics and writing are those who are most likely to drop out of school when they get to high school. We know that children who are not ready to begin first grade are more likely than their peers to drop out of school later. We know that the dropout problem cannot be solved by schools alone. Preventing teens from dropping out of school requires services from and cooperation among schools, community agencies and local businesses.

One of the most troubling and confusing issues in addressing the dropout problem is deciding when to count a student as having dropped out and how to calculate the dropout rate. Newspaper reports in SREB states — most notably Florida, South Carolina and Texas — in the last year highlighted problems associated with understanding dropout rates. Legislative hearings on the dropout problem are being conducted in Texas this year.

This report describes and compares different methods used to calculate and report dropout rates; looks at advantages and disadvantages of each method; explains what we know about students who drop out of school; and outlines actions states are taking to reduce dropout rates. To reduce the number of students who drop out of school, state leaders must

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insist on proper and accurate collection of data and reporting on dropout rates; support programs and actions that prevent students from dropping out; provide incentives and rewards for schools to give the academic and personal support needed by students who are most likely to drop out; and require coordination of services among schools and other government and community agencies that work with children and families.

Mark Musick
SREB President

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Reducing Dropout Rates

Are dropout rates in SREB states lower now than in the 1980s?

What is the dropout rate in your state and how is it measured?

Who drops out of school and why?

What actions are states taking to reduce further the dropout rates?

Are dropout rates in SREB states lower now than in the 1980s?

Yes.

- The percentage of young people (ages 16 to 24) who are not enrolled in school and who are not high school graduates dropped from 18 percent in the early 1980s to just below 12 percent in 1997 but crept back up to about 13 percent in 1998. The national rate is 12 percent. (See Table 1.)
- Thirteen of the 16 SREB states have smaller percentages of teens (ages 16 to 19) dropping out of school than they had in 1986. The percentages increased in only two SREB states. (See Table 2.)

The measures in Tables 1 and 2 are used to compare dropout rates because they are calculated the same way for each state and are comparable from one year to the next. All SREB states now report the percentages of students in grades nine through 12 who do not graduate and who do not return to school each year. However, the method of calculating these rates and the definitions of who is counted have changed, and the current rates are not comparable with those from earlier years in many states. In states that have retained the same definition of dropouts, rates are about the same as or lower than they were in the early 1990s.

Because states use dropout rates as a measure of performance in school accountability systems, it is important for state leaders to understand different ways to calculate dropout rates. The different rates that result from different methods can lead to confusion. Some rates are more appropriate than others for making decisions about the effectiveness of schools and of dropout prevention programs and for assessing progress in reducing the rates.

This report was prepared by Joseph D. Creech, SREB director of educational policies.

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Table 1
Percent of 16- through 24-year-olds who have dropped out of school

	Nation	Northeast	Midwest	South *	West
1975	13.9	11.3	10.9	18.9	13.0
1980	14.1	10.4	11.5	18.2	14.9
1985	12.6	9.9	9.8	15.2	14.6
1990	12.1	8.7	9.1	14.5	14.7
1991	12.5	9.1	9.7	14.1	15.9
1992	11.0	8.6	7.9	12.4	14.4
1993	11.0	8.5	8.8	13.0	12.5
1994	11.5	8.6	7.7	13.5	14.7
1995	12.0	8.4	8.9	14.2	14.6
1996	11.1	8.3	7.7	13.0	13.9
1997	11.0	10.5	8.8	11.7	12.5
1998	11.8	9.4	8.0	13.1	15.3

Source: National Center for Education Statistics, *Dropout Rates in the United States*, various years

* South includes SREB states and the District of Columbia.

What is the dropout rate in your state?

"It is not possible to compare dropout rates among states because there is neither a common definition of the term 'dropout' nor a uniform method of collecting information at the state and national levels." That was how SREB in 1990 described the difficulty in obtaining information on dropout rates.

Today, more states use similar definitions and methods for collecting information on how many students drop out of school each year. Students generally are considered to have dropped out when they leave school, do not transfer to another school, do not graduate and do not return to school the next year. Students are not considered to have dropped out of school when they transfer to another public or private school, are home-schooled, enroll in college early, or graduate or receive a GED certificate.

Yet comparable information on who drops out of school is hard to come by. One state may count a student who transfers from one school to another as a dropout because it has no system to track students who transfer.

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Table 2
Percent of teens who drop out of high school,* 1986 and 1997**

	1986	1997
United States	11	10
Alabama	15	12
Arkansas	13	9
Delaware	10	10
Florida	15	12
Georgia	14	13
Kentucky	13	14
Louisiana	15	12
Maryland	8	7
Mississippi	12	11
North Carolina	13	12
Oklahoma	11	10
South Carolina	10	11
Tennessee	15	13
Texas	16	13
Virginia	12	8
West Virginia	13	9

Source: *1999 Kids Count Data Book.*

* The percentage of 16- to 19-year-olds who are not enrolled in school and are not high school graduates.

** Three-year averages were used to reduce random change. For example, the 1997 figure is the average of data from 1995, 1996 and 1997.

Another state may be able to account for students who transfer within the same district but may not be able to identify students who transfer to schools in other districts or in other states. Schools' accuracy in counting and reporting information also varies.

The various methods of calculating dropout rates convey different messages that may result in different decisions about which strategies to follow. Policy-makers need to be aware of the different ways that dropout rates are calculated and the advantages of each method.

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The percentage of ninth-graders who do not graduate within five years — the longitudinal dropout rate

The most credible definition of a dropout rate is one consistent with the public's understanding of the term "dropout": someone who enters ninth grade and, during the next four or five years, does not complete high school and no longer is enrolled. This rate — called a "longitudinal" or "cohort" dropout rate — is calculated by dividing the number of students who drop out and do not return to school by the number in the original class.

Advantages:

This method is consistent with the public's understanding of the definition of dropping out of school.

A longitudinal dropout rate accounts for students who leave school one year and return later, and it can account for students who are retained in grade nine but stay in school and graduate later than their original classmates.

Disadvantages:

Education agencies in most SREB states do not have information systems to track individual students as they progress from grade to grade, transfer to other public schools in the state, move to another state, or graduate. Only two SREB states — Florida and Texas — have implemented systems capable of producing "longitudinal" dropout rates.

In the absence of information systems that can follow students over a period of years, longitudinal dropout rates often are estimated based on a sample of students (within a state or across the nation) or are projected based on "annual" dropout rates.

The percentage of students in grades nine through 12 who leave school without a diploma each year — the annual dropout rate

Every SREB states now calculates and reports an "annual" dropout rate. The annual dropout rate is the percentage of students who are enrolled in May or June who do not graduate and do not return to school in September or October. It is the rate used most frequently to report school and district performance in state accountability systems. Annual dropout rates reported by different states may not be comparable for several reasons. States may include different grade levels (grades seven through 12; grades nine through 12) in the calculation or may define who drops out of school differently. The annual dropout rates for grades nine through 12 — as calculated and reported by SREB states — range from 1.6 percent in Texas to 10.2 percent in Louisiana.

The National Center for Education Statistics is working with states to calculate dropout rates in ways that will allow comparisons among states. In reporting annual dropout rates for the 1996-97 school year, 37 states used consistent data definitions and methods of collecting information from schools. These 37 states had the same definitions of who was enrolled, who had completed

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a high school program, and who did not return to school. Eleven of the 37 states were SREB states: Alabama, Arkansas, Delaware, Georgia, Louisiana, Maryland, Mississippi, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia and West Virginia.

Using the National Center for Education Statistics definition, the annual dropout rates for grades nine through 12 in the 37 participating states range from less than 3 percent in North Dakota and Wisconsin to almost 12 percent in Louisiana. Among the 11 SREB states reporting for 1996-97, Texas and West Virginia had the lowest annual rates (about 4 percent); Louisiana (12 percent), Georgia (8 percent) and Mississippi (6 percent) had the highest rates. Alabama, Arkansas, Delaware, Maryland, Tennessee and Virginia reported rates of about 5 percent.

Advantages:

The annual dropout rate is easy to calculate and requires states to collect little additional data.

Calculating this rate is a practical way for schools and states to get a handle on the numbers of students leaving school each year.

Disadvantages:

Because the annual dropout rate includes only students who drop out in each year, it is a low rate and may understate the dropout problem over four years of high school.

Table 3 illustrates the differences that result from using each state's method to calculate annual dropout rates and from using the National Center for Education Statistics method. One factor that affects annual dropout rates is the range of grade levels used to compute the rates. For example, some states count the number of students who drop out in grades seven through 12 and divide by the number of students enrolled in those grades. Most students drop out of school in grades nine through 12, after they reach the age at which they no longer are required to attend school. A much smaller number drop out of school in grades seven and eight, and including these grades in this calculation understates the dropout rate. For example, Virginia's annual dropout rate for grades seven through 12 is 3.2 percent; for grades nine through 12 the rate is 5.1 percent.

The percentage of ninth-graders not enrolled in grade 12 four years later — the attrition rate

By subtracting the number of high school graduates from the number of students in the ninth-grade class four years earlier and then dividing by that ninth-grade enrollment, one arrives at a crude measure of the percentage of students who do not finish high school on time. This figure usually is used when total enrollment numbers are the only data available.

Advantage:

The numbers are readily available.

Disadvantages:

This method does not adequately account for students who fail, who move from school to school or who take more than four years to graduate. For example, data from several states

Table 3

Annual dropout rates as calculated by SREB states and by the National Center for Education Statistics

	Using the state's method for 1998-99	Grades used in state calculation	Using NCES method for 1996-97 for grades nine through 12
Alabama	—[1]	9-12	5.3%
Arkansas	3.9%[2]	7-12	5.0
Delaware	4.1	9-12	4.5
Florida	5.4	9-12	—
Georgia	6.5	9-12	8.2
Kentucky	5.3	9-12	—
Louisiana	10.2	9-12	11.6
Maryland	4.1	9-12	4.9
Mississippi	2.0	1-12	6.0
North Carolina	4.6	7-12	—
Oklahoma	5.0	9-12	—
South Carolina	2.7[2]	9-12	—
Tennessee	4.2	9-12	5.1
Texas	1.6	7-12	3.6
Virginia	3.2	7-12	4.6
West Virginia	2.9[2]	7-12	4.1

1 Alabama uses the NCES method to calculate an annual rate and calculates and reports a projected four-year dropout rate of 15.3 percent.

2 1997-98 state rate is most recent information.

— State did not calculate rate using this method.

show failure rates as high as 20 percent in ninth grade. Thus, the 12th-grade class would be 20 percent smaller than the ninth-grade class, even if all the students who did not fail went on to complete high school in four years.

This method also fails to account for students who graduate early and are not included in grade 12 enrollment figures. The attrition rate tends to overstate the dropout rate and is not recommended.

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The percentage of teenagers who are not high school graduates and are not enrolled in school — the status dropout rate

Kids Count, an often-cited report on the well-being of children, reports that about 10 percent of the nation's 16- to 19-year-olds are not enrolled in school and are not high school graduates. In the SREB states, the percentages range from 7 percent to 14 percent. The percentage of a particular age group who are not enrolled in school and who do not have high school diplomas is called a "status" dropout rate. Status dropout rates are calculated from data collected by the U.S. Census Bureau through population surveys.

Advantages:

Status rates are calculated the same way for the same age group in each state and in the nation and may be the most appropriate rates for comparing state results and for determining changes over time.

A status rate represents the dropout problem for all people in an age group.

Disadvantages:

Like all estimates based on samples, these percentages contain some errors. The information for three years is averaged to reduce the differences attributed to the size of population samples in the states.

Status rates are not available for individual schools and school districts.

The percentage of young adults (ages 18 to 24) who complete high school — the high school completion rate

School completion rates provided by the U.S. Census Bureau show that 85 percent of the nation's young adults (ages 18 to 24) have high school diplomas or the equivalent. In SREB states the percentages range from 80 percent in Texas to 95 percent in Maryland. Maryland is one of 15 states nationwide in which 90 percent or more of the young adults have high school diplomas.

Advantages:

The information is comparable among states.

The high school completion rate provides a good estimate of a state's needs for adult education and training.

Disadvantages:

The high school completion rate of 18- to 24-year-olds is not a very appropriate indicator of a particular state's dropout problem because there is more interstate mobility among this age group than among 16- to 19-year-olds.

Like the status rates, the percentages contain some errors because of sampling.

These rates are not available for individual schools and school districts.

Table 4 shows annual dropout rates for grades nine through 12, the percentage of teens who drop out of school, high school completion rates among young adults, and grade 12 enrollment as a percentage of grade nine enrollment four years earlier. In general, a state that

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Table 4
Selected measure of dropout rates and school completion rates

	Annual dropout rates, grades nine through 12	Percent of teens (16- to 19-year-olds) who drop out of school	High school completion rates, 18- to 24-year-olds	Grade 12 enrollment as percentage of grade nine enrollment four years earlier
United States	5%	10%	85%	74%
Alabama	5*	12	84	70
Arkansas	5*	9	85	80
Delaware	5*	10	89	71
Florida	5	12	84	63
Georgia	8*	13	85	61
Kentucky	5	14	85	72
Louisiana	12*	12	82	61
Maryland	5*	7	95	74
Mississippi	6*	11	82	62
North Carolina	5	12	85	64
Oklahoma	5	10	86	77
South Carolina	3	11	88	61
Tennessee	5*	13	87	67
Texas	4*	13	80	64
Virginia	5*	8	86	79
West Virginia	4*	9	89	81

Source: State education agencies; *1999 Kids Count Data Book;* National Center of Education Statistics

* Dropout rates for grades 9-12 calculated using NCES method.

has a high dropout rate will have a low completion rate and grade 12 enrollment will be a smaller percentage of grade nine enrollment. A state with a low dropout rate will have a high completion rate.

As noted earlier, the relationship of grade 12 enrollment to grade nine enrollment does not account for students who were retained; students who completed school early; or students who dropped out and then enrolled later

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in the same district, a different district or a different state. This percentage therefore will be lower than the completion rate of young adults, which does include students who dropped out, were retained and completed high school later, or earned GED certificates. The completion rate also reflects migration into and out of the state. For example, if many 18- to 24-year-olds with high school diplomas move into a state and few state residents who have high school diplomas move to other states, the high school completion rate will increase. Changes in high school completion rates are influenced by factors other than state actions to increase the rates.

The dropout data sometimes are inconsistent. For example, South Carolina reports the smallest percentage of students who drop out each year *and* the smallest percentage of ninth-graders who become 12th-graders in four years. The most likely explanation is that there are flaws in South Carolina's procedures for collecting information used to calculate the annual dropout rate. Because of such differences, several SREB states have reviewed or are reviewing procedures that schools use to report who drops out of school as well as the accuracy of these reports.

Following a review of different methods of reporting dropout rates, Alabama's state board of education decided to use the dropout rate at each grade level to project the percentage of students who drop out during the four years of high school. When the Louisiana Department of Education switched from collecting school-level counts of students who dropped out to keeping records on individual students, the annual dropout rate changed from about 4 percent to almost 12 percent. Florida recently changed its method of calculating an annual dropout rate to include *all* students who drop out of school in grades nine through 12 rather than only students age 16 and older who drop out. The Texas legislature is reviewing different methods used to report dropout rates for the state's schools and will determine the most appropriate method.

Who drops out of school and why?

Understanding who is dropping out of school and why can help states develop policies to get more students to stay in school and graduate. National and state studies show that the students who are most likely to leave without completing high school often:

- live in single-parent households;
- live in low-income households;
- have parents or brothers or sisters who dropped out of school;
- do not speak English well (27 percent of all students who drop out of school were born in other countries; another 10 percent are children of parents born in other countries);
- have repeated one or more grades;
- are behavioral problems in school; and are absent frequently from school.

Sixty-four percent of students in public schools are white; 43 percent of all students who drop out of school are. Seventeen percent of students in public schools are black; 17 percent of students who drop out of school are black. Fourteen percent of students in public

Table 5
Students who drop out (by race and gender)

Group	Percent of public school enrollment	Percent of this group who drop out of school	Percent of all dropouts who fall into this group
White	64	8	43
Black	17	14	17
Hispanic	14	30	38
Male	51	13	57
Female	49	10	43

Source: National Center for Education Statistics, *Dropout Rates in the United States: 1998*, November 1999

schools are Hispanic; 38 percent of students who drop out of school are Hispanic.

Black students are almost twice as likely as white students to drop out of school; Hispanic students are more than three times as likely as white students to drop out. Boys are more likely than girls to drop out. (See Table 5.)

Knowing which students are most likely to drop out of school helps states focus efforts to help them. Knowing their reasons for dropping out helps states develop strategies that respond to students' needs. Surveys of students who drop out of high school show that they typically do so for a combination of reasons. The most frequently cited reasons related to school are:

- dislike of school and teachers, poor grades and inability to get along with classmates;
- a perception that what is being learned in school is not relevant to real life;
- inability to keep up with peers because of low achievement in reading, writing, mathematics and other basic skills; and
- behavioral problems and attendance problems that result in expulsion.

The most frequently cited reasons not directly related to school are:

- child care, marriage and pregnancy;
- the opportunity to have jobs (almost always low-skills jobs) and earn money; and
- peer groups outside of school.

Schools themselves can contribute to high dropout rates. High dropout rates are associated with schools that have poorly organized academic programs, morale problems, ineffective teachers and low expectations of students. Many academic problems that students experience in high school began when they were in middle school. Schools also contribute to higher dropout rates when they do not provide additional support to help middle school students who fall behind.

Some claim that raising expectations for students and establishing higher standards will result in more students' dropping out of

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Table 6
State assistance to local schools and districts to reduce dropout rates

	AL	AR	DE	FL	GA	KY	LA	MD	MS	NC	OK	SC	TN	TX	VA	WV
Provides financial assistance to encourage development encourage development of dropout prevention programs	✓			✓	✓	✓		✓		✓	✓			✓	✓	
Evaluates districts' or schools' dropout prevention programs				✓		✓		✓	✓		✓			✓	✓	✓
Requires local school districts to establish special goals for reducing dropout rates		✓			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓				✓	✓	✓	✓
Holds state workshops on dropout prevention for schoolprincipals and superintendents			✓	✓		✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Holds regional or state workshops on dropout prevention for teachers and counselors				✓				✓		✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
Provides schools with technical assistance in developing dropout prevention programs	✓			✓	✓	✓		✓		✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓
Disseminates information on successful practices in dropout prevention	✓			✓	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓
Makes on-site visits and reviews of schools with chronic dropout problems to evaluate progress and provides school leaders with recommendations for specific actions	✓				✓			✓			✓			✓		✓
Requires all school systems to develop dropout prevention plans, which are reviewed and/or approved by the state department of education	✓							✓	✓		✓				✓	✓

Source: SREB survey of state education agencies, 1999-2000.

school. Experiences in some SREB states do not support this notion. Kentucky, Maryland, North Carolina and Texas raised standards and increased expectations for students and schools during the 1990s. Since the late 1980s, the percentage of 16- to 19-year-olds who leave school decreased by three percentage points in Maryland and by one percentage point in North Carolina and Texas. Kentucky's dropout rate is one percentage point higher. If higher expectations and standards were to cause dramatic increases in dropout rates, one would expect to have seen the effects in these states by now.

What actions are states taking to reduce further the dropout rates?

Establishing comprehensive plans

Reducing the dropout rate obviously is not easy. The subject has been discussed and debated for years and has been the focus of various programs. To meet the challenge, each state needs a comprehensive plan that includes:

- a credible, reliable definition of a "dropout" that is consistent among schools and that motivates schools to report accurately;
- a good state-level information system that can track students' movements among schools and districts and can provide information on who drops out of school and why;
- a system to identify early which students are most likely to drop out of school and to provide them with additional help and resources;
- challenging academic and vocational/technical programs and teachers who know various teaching styles to help students understand the value of what they are learning;
- a way to bring together resources and services from the school and from other community and government agencies to prevent students from dropping out of school and to attract those who have dropped out into alternative programs that lead to high school diplomas; and
- a system to evaluate the effectiveness of dropout prevention programs and programs to attract those who do drop out back to school or into alternative programs.

Holding schools accountable for dropout rates

Every SREB state now publishes annual dropout rates for the state, school districts and individual schools. Ten SREB states (Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, North Carolina, Maryland, Tennessee, Texas and West Virginia) use dropout rates as performance indicators in school accountability systems. Dropout rates are one of the factors used to identify high- and low-performing schools. For example:

- Kentucky passed legislation in 2000 that limits rewards given through the accountability system to schools that have annual dropout rates of less than 5 percent.

- School districts and schools in Texas that have annual dropout rates higher than 6 percent are rated "low-performing."
- Schools in Florida must have annual dropout rates below the state average to be recognized as "high-performing."

Most states also require schools to establish special goals for reducing dropout rates. Seven SREB states (Florida, Kentucky, Maryland, Oklahoma, Texas, Virginia and West Virginia) evaluate dropout prevention programs in districts or schools. Alabama, Maryland, Oklahoma, Virginia and West Virginia require all school districts to develop dropout prevention plans that must be reviewed and approved by the state departments of education.

Providing assistance to local schools and districts

State education agencies in most SREB states conduct workshops that show school superintendents, principals, counselors and teachers how to prevent students from dropping out of school. All SREB states provide all schools with information on successful practices for dropout prevention.

Most SREB states provide schools with technical assistance to develop dropout prevention programs. Alabama, Georgia, Maryland, Oklahoma, Texas and West Virginia conduct on-site reviews of schools that have chronic dropout problems. Teams evaluate the schools' progress and recommend specific actions they should take to reduce dropout rates.

Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Maryland, North Carolina, Oklahoma, Texas and Virginia provide financial assistance to encourage school districts to develop dropout prevention programs.

Establishing policies that encourage school attendance and completion

Frequent absences are an early warning sign that a student is likely to drop out of school. All SREB states enable local schools to intervene when students have excessive absences. Delaware, Florida, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, North Carolina, Texas and Virginia have established minimum definitions of truancy or excessive absenteeism to be used by all school districts. Local school boards can set more stringent attendance requirements but may not set less stringent ones. Other SREB states allow local school districts to define excessive absenteeism. The number of unexcused absences that define truancy or excessive absenteeism varies from state to state. For example:

- In Delaware, Kentucky and North Carolina, a truant is a student who has three days of unexcused absences; in Louisiana and Virginia, a student who has five days of unexcused absences is a truant.
- In Florida, a student who has 15 unexcused absences within 90 calendar days is a habitual truant. Maryland defines habitual truancy as being absent from school more than 20 percent of the school days within any term or year. Texas defines excessive absenteeism as 10 or more days of unexcused absences within a six-month period — or three or more days within a four-week period.

States help schools encourage regular attendance through policies that:

- require local schools to contact the parents of students who miss school and do not have a written excuse from parents;
- require counseling for students and parents when students exceed a certain number of unexcused absences from school;
- enable local judicial systems to help provide early intervention in truancy problems and to prosecute parents for not curbing their children's excessive absenteeism; and
- require students to prove that they are in school or have high school diplomas before obtaining driver's licenses — and suspend the driver's licenses of students who have excessive unexcused absences from school.

Establishing dropout recovery programs

Programs also are needed to locate students who have dropped out of school and encourage them to return and earn high school diplomas.

Kentucky requires local school districts to contact personally students ages 16 to 18 who drop out of school and to encourage them to re-enroll. Dropout recovery programs typically involve coordination of services from several public and private community agencies. For example, Maryland's dropout recovery plan includes increased funding for comprehensive services and greater coordination of efforts among schools and other agencies. It also offers incentives to encourage innovative approaches to reducing the dropout rate.

Florida's program to reduce dropouts includes a program for teen parents that provides health and social services, child care and transportation. The program also offers regular academic classes — allowing teen parents to continue their educational program — and classes in child development, nutrition and parenting skills.

All SREB states have alternative schools or programs that lead to alternative diplomas or GED certificates. Many school systems now operate special schools that have smaller classes for and give extra attention to students with histories of academic or disciplinary problems or who quit or were expelled. Many alternative-school programs are for disruptive, disobedient students who exhibit dangerous behavior. They are designed to remove these students from traditional classrooms. Alternative classes may take place within a school or in a separate building away from the school. Some alternative programs focus on discipline and order; others focus on individualized counseling and mentoring for students. The programs also are supposed to upgrade students' academic skills and prepare them for graduation from high school or for the General Education Development (GED) tests.

Some observers fear that alternative schools will become nothing more than convenient places to "dump" or "warehouse" disruptive students. Others question whether these schools can provide the same educational opportunities that conventional high schools offer. It sometimes is difficult to find teachers for alternative schools because of the challenging nature of the students.

Other alternative programs serve students who have dropped out of school or who are about to drop out. These programs provide flexible scheduling for teenage parents, young adults who need to work to support their families, and other students who have trouble with the traditional school schedule.

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Table 7

State policies and practices to help reduce absenteeism

	AL	AR	DE	FL	GA	KY	LA	MD	MS	NC	OK	SC	TN	TX	VA	WV
Requires schools to contact parents of students who have unexcused absences	✓	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Requires schools to provide counseling to students and parents when students have a particular number of unexcused absences			✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓				✓
Has state agreements with local judicial systems to provide early intervention in truancy cases	✓	✓	✓	✓				✓	✓			✓		✓		
Allows local judicial systems to prosecute parents for not curbing their children's excessive absenteeism	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Requires students to prove that they are in school in order to obtain driver's licenses or to reinstate suspended licenses	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓	✓

Source: SREB survey of state education agencies, 1999-2000.

What have we learned?

In the 1980s, many SREB states started programs to reduce dropout rates. As a result, the rates declined steadily from the 1980s to the mid-1990s. In 1980, more than 18 percent of young people in the South had not graduated and were not enrolled in school. By 1997 the figure had dropped to about 12 percent. The rate crept back up to 13 percent in 1998. This may mean that schools and communities are doing the right things — but not as effectively as possible. It also may mean that the dropout prevention programs of the 1980s and early 1990s have reached the students most open to help. It also means that states need to continue searching for ways to identify the students who are most likely to quit school and need to provide them with effective assistance and incentives to stay in school.

The process of dropping out of school begins early. Strategies that improve student achievement are strategies that will reduce the dropout rate.

Strategies that work:

- Identify early the students who are at risk and provide these students with both academic and social interventions to help them overcome problems that begin in preschool and continue through elementary, middle and high school.
- Do whatever is necessary to prepare students for the transitions from elementary to middle to high school and to help students connect with at least one teacher or counselor. In some schools each teacher is assigned to advise a group of students and work with them each year until they complete high school. These programs show that one person can make a difference in whether students complete high school.
- Involve parents in school activities and in planning their children's programs of study.
- Coordinate the efforts of state and community agencies and organizations.
- Commitment from state leaders and leaders in schools and communities to solve the dropout problem.

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